

VZCZCXRO9319
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR
DE RUEHVB #0715/01 3411143
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 071143Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY ZAGREB
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9708
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ZAGREB 000715

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/04/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [HR](#)

SUBJECT: RACE FOR CROATIA'S THIRD PRESIDENT IN FULL SWING

Classified By: Classified By: Ambassador James Foley, for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The race to become Croatia's third president began officially on November 18, giving the candidates just over five-weeks to woo voters before the first round of voting on December 27. While the election will almost certainly require a run-off between the top two candidates, the stakes in this election are probably lower than in previous years. Because the role of Croatia's president is primarily ceremonial and none of the candidates has the gravitas of the outgoing incumbent, the next Croatian president is likely to have less influence on the domestic political scene. Furthermore, none of the leading candidates has expressed views on international issues that might affect Croatian support for US foreign policy objectives. END
SUMMARY

12. (U) Twelve candidates will be on the December 27th ballot, and all have begun campaigning intensively around the country. But the real race is between at most six candidates, with no single candidate likely to gain a majority of votes in the first round. Ivo Josipovic of the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), is leading in the polls and is likely to reach the January 10 run-off. However the race for the second run-off slot is up for grabs between two independent candidates, the popular mayor of Zagreb Milan Bandic, and the former president of the Croatian Chamber of commerce Nadan Vidosevic. The ruling Croatian Democratic Union's (HDZ) candidate, Andrija Hebrang, a former Health Minister and Defense Minister, may also have a shot at the second round. Two other dark horse candidates to make the second round are independent candidate and former Education Minister Dragan Primorac, and Vesna Pusic of the opposition Croatian Peoples Party (HNS).

13. (SBU) The function of the Croatian president is largely ceremonial apart from a formal role in foreign policy as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and as co-decision maker with the Prime Minister on the naming of many ambassadors and the chief of the intelligence service. (NOTE: The Croatian parliament in 2000 under an SDP-led government substantially reduced the powers of the presidency in the aftermath of the highly-centralized rule of Croatia's first President Franjo Tudjman.) Despite the reduced stature of the presidency, incumbent president Stjepan Mesic by force of his own reputation and gravitas - as Croatia's first Prime Minister, the last president of the former Yugoslavia, and one of the first Speakers of Parliament - was able to wield a great deal of informal authority and act as a check on the power of the government. However, his successor, whoever it may be, is unlikely to preserve such a level of influence, and the role of the presidency could be increasingly be confined to ceremonial duties. Nonetheless, the presidency undeniably provides the winner with a bully pulpit by which presidents can inject their thoughts into public debate and have some influence in domestic policy.

14. (SBU) Each of the candidates' campaign themes provides hints as to the areas where they are likely to focus their presidency and advocate most vociferously in policy formation. Josipovic's campaign, dubbed "a new justice," highlights improving the rule of law and combating corruption in Croatia. Hebrang's campaign -- "for a proud and European Croatia" -- is mix of promoting pride in Croatia's struggle in the 1990s for independence, and its goal of attaining eventual EU membership. Vidosevic has argued the next president must make the economy the number one priority and that he is uniquely qualified to promote Croatia's prosperity. Bandic, a devout Catholic who was born in Herzegovina, has the least polish of any of the major candidates, and is the only one who cannot speak English. His campaign involves a very populist appeal packed with metaphors and promises to work hard and champion the issues of the average Croatian.

15. (C) European diplomats appears to have a strong preference for the SDP's Josipovic. Among the four major candidates, law professor Josipovic is the least likely to pose any awkward questions for the EU in terms of Croatia's readiness for membership. His campaign's focus on anti-corruption also jibes well with the EU's concerns about southeast Europe as a region. By contrast, in comments to us, EU diplomats have raised concerns about all three other top contenders: Bandic, because of corruption allegations and doubts about "his understanding of the rule of law;" Vidosevic, because of lingering questions about the source of his personal wealth;

ZAGREB 00000715 002 OF 002

and Hebrang, because of his personal associations with the Tudjman era, partisan defense of suspected corrupt politicians within the HDZ, and history of nationalist rhetoric, including early opposition to cooperation with the ICTY.

16. (C) That said, our productive engagement with Croatia on key US foreign policy objectives in the region or in the world should easily continue with any of the serious contenders in this election. All are firm supporters of NATO and want to see Croatia as a member of the EU. Furthermore, they support US policy goals vis-a-vis stabilizing Southeastern Europe via Euro-Atlantic integration. Some candidates - Josipovic and Vidosevic among them - have been lukewarm on the terms of the recent arbitration deal to resolve the lingering border dispute with Slovenia, but only Josipovic openly opposed the deal, and that presumably out of political calculation. No candidate has spoken out against Croatia's deployments to Afghanistan, and several candidates - Bandic and Vidosevic among them - have explicitly stated they could support additional troop deployments.

17. (C) The election outcome could trigger a shakeup of the domestic political scene, particularly for the two largest parties - the HDZ and SDP. Hebrang's anticipated loss in the first round could weaken the older, more conservative generation of the HDZ, of which he is a charter member. This could provide an opening for Prime Minister Kosor to make additional changes to the party leadership, perhaps even including a re-shuffle of HDZ ministers in her cabinet. As for the SDP, Josipovic is strongly backed by SDP chief Zoran Milanovic and is widely seen as Milanovic's candidate. Should Josipovic fail to win, particularly if he loses to former SDP member Bandic, it could precipitate a shake-up of the SDP leadership.

18. (C) COMMENT: This campaign has a decidedly contemporary feel, with all major candidates employing image consultants and PR firms. Reflecting this, Croatian media are full of

local pundits and analysts providing commentary and grades on everything from fashion to diction. At least in rhetoric, there are few stark ideological differences between the candidates, which is no surprise given the president's lack of executive authorities. Nonetheless, the four leading candidates do present Croatian voters with four distinct choices in terms of background, education and outlook. Josipovic is a classic European center-left politician, while Hebrang is a traditional center-right political figure. Vidosevic cultivates the image of a successful businessman turned politician (although many would say politician turned successful businessman is a more accurate description), while Bandic is an openly populist candidate. Who the electorate chooses as its next president will send an important signal about the Croatian public's values as the country stands at the doorstep of EU membership. END COMMENT
FOLEY